

The earliest vocals on this disc are “La java de Cézique” and “Mon apéro”, both recorded in December 1935 during Piaf’s first Polydor recording sessions. These charming – if aurally imperfect – tracks catapulted Piaf to popularity. Remaining tracks featured on the disc, all recorded for Polydor or Columbia in Paris, span Piaf’s most vocally productive era. Several other songs she co-authored are also featured, including “J’ai dansé avec l’amour” and “Tu es partout” (co-authored with Marguerite Monnot), “C’est un monsieur très distingué” (co-authored with Louis Louiguy), and “Un refrain courait dans la rue” (co-authored with Chauvigny). All but the last were recorded in Paris during the Nazi occupation. The recurrent accusation of her collaboration with the Nazis more likely results from a naively apolitical attitude. Despite her politics – or lack of them – the French Resistance adopted Piaf’s recordings from this period as virtual anthems. Virtually all of these tracks are gems, but standing out is Piaf’s 1937 rendition of “Mon Légionnaire,” which rivals “La vie en rose” as Piaf’s most emblematic recording. The overall light-heartedness of many of these vocals is in stark contrast to the existential moroseness of Piaf’s later renditions, even though her legend is largely built on the aura of tragedy and the emotive potency of her post-World War II concertizing.

Even the most exacting listener will be satisfied with the audio quality of *Edith Piaf: Tu es partout – Original 1935-1947 Recordings*, since many of the most familiar tracks sound significantly better here than on many other Piaf compilations. The balance between the vocal and the accompaniment is just right, and the vitality of both mine a freshness from these fifty to sixty year old recordings. Since this disc also features many of the songs most closely associated with Piaf, it provides an inexpensive way to add a high quality collection of Piaf vocals to a collection of mid-twentieth century popular music. *Reviewed by James Fisher*

**Beniamino Gigli: *The Complete HMV Recordings 1933-1935*.**<sup>1</sup> Romophone 82017-2 (2 CDs).

As Gigli’s voice soars through “Sì, fui soldato” from *Andrea Chénier* at the beginning of this set, it is at once obvious that we are about to hear some of the greatest operatic singing ever preserved on records; indeed, at first, vocal masterpiece follows vocal masterpiece in a profusion possible only for a great tenor who, in his early forties, was still at the very zenith of his powers. In arias from *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* there is flaming and tearful passion; latter-day criticism of these “excesses” entails the unthinkable conundrums of a Turiddu and a Canio who do not weep, albeit melodically, when their lives enter the moments of their final extremities. In Handel’s “Ombra mai fui” there is, on the other hand, spacious grandeur and in “Una furtiva lagrima” a beauty of soft, contemplative tone that is without peer. The famous “E lucevan le stelle” promptly follows, its tremulous opening phrases and entranced mezza voce leading to a fretful climax that is adorned with a crescendo on the top A; this in turn leads to a captivating “La donna è mobile” which tellingly delineates the Duke’s flippant amorous volatility.

Both interspersed and ensuing are five Italian and Neapolitan songs that attracted immense popularity when Gigli recorded them. “Santa Lucia” alone was said to sell a million copies in its first year, despite the Great Depression, and to approach five millions in sales before the outbreak of war in 1939. “O sole mio” is equally well sung and unforgettable, as are “Addio bel sogno” and “Senza nisciuno”. But, it is Bixio’s celebrated “Solo per te, Lucia” that is perhaps the ultimate vocal gem here; it is a song of deep biographical significance for Gigli and he sings it with a lyrically beautiful perfection of phrasing that beggars description, light though the music is.

When we move to the recordings of 1935, the year in which Gigli had originally planned to retire, there is indeed a perceptible darkening of the timbre. He is still a very great tenor as he enters his later forties, a master of expression with a plenitude of breath and great powers in *mezza voce*, but something of the former consistent glory has gone. He is in a phase of artistic transition that will lead him eventually to his first *Aïda*, to *Il Trovatore* and briefly even to *Isabeau*, in short to the repertoire of a more dramatic tenor than he has hitherto been. Nevertheless all his pieces are sung with verve, control, and winning expression. Unfortunately, Mark Obert-Thorn, who has generally done the transfers as well as the variable quality of the original 78s permits, appears to have reduced the volume of Glück's "O del mio dolce ardor" and Martini's "Plaisir d'amour" arbitrarily so that something of the fullness of the original sound is reduced. The effect is not unlovely, but the practice is questionable, and Gigli's shadings are less striking than on the originals. That he has lost little or nothing of his popular appeal is, however, made evident by the two de Curtis songs with which the first CD ends. "Non ti scordar me," in particular, composed as the theme song of Gigli's first film of the same name, presents the idea of the romantic tenor with a popular appeal that has scarcely faded after nearly seventy years.

On the second CD we move back in time to 1934 and Gigli's first complete opera recording, *I Pagliacci*, with Iva Pacetti, Mario Basiola, and artists, chorus, and orchestra of La Scala conducted by Franco Ghione. This recording is too well known and is currently available on too many other labels to need detailed review here. Gigli's Canio is justly celebrated as the best preserved complete on records and all the other principals, especially Iva Pacetti and Mario Basiola, sing excellently, supported by a Scala ensemble that is beyond reproach, while the transfers are of a high quality that is unsurpassed by any of the other labels. The final scene is particularly arresting, presenting a Canio who sincerely loves his wife and is driven to distraction only by the tantalizing reenactment of her infidelity on stage. In interview, Iris Adami-Coradetti recalled that Gigli acted this scene with both his voice and his person with an often-terrifying conviction. His simulated rage was so convincing, she said, that when he drew the knife she felt herself to be in very real danger.<sup>2</sup> Rina Gigli, who often sang this opera with her father, said much the same thing.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the set there is a fascinating addendum when Gigli sings Harlequin's Serenade "O Colombina" with Iva Pacetti, displaying his virtuosity in even this *comprimario* role by singing the first verse in true, rollicking troubadour fashion while making a magical transformation of his tone to a tender and intimate *mezza voce* at the reprise. *Reviewed by Colin Bain*

## Endnotes

1. Arias and ensembles from *Andrea Chénier*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Xerxes*, *Pagliacci*, *L'Elisir d'Amore*, *Tosca*, *Rigoletto*, *Carmen*, and *Paride ed Elena*. Songs by Cottrau, Di Capua, de Curtis, Bixio, Rossini, Martini, and Massenet. The complete *Pagliacci* with Iva Pacetti, Mario Basiola, Leone Paci, Giuseppe Nessi, Arnaldo Borghi, and the Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala, Milan, conducted by Franco Ghione. Chorus Master Vittore Veneziani.
2. Interview with Iris Adami-Coradetti, Rome, 1977.
3. Interview with Rina Gigli, Rome, 1977.